

Product Photography:

The story behinds the image.

(Topic TBD)

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As a young product designer, thought out years of my practises and studies more and more I realise the importance of product photography. The story begins at couple years ago, a discussion with my tutor Karen Richmond who request me to conduct a series photo shoot of my works for portfolio purpose. At that moment, I did not see myself as a product photographer, and I certainly had zero interest in photography, so I questioned Karen that as a product design student should I focus more on the prototype piece than just take a nice picture. But, she answer me with another question that how many people will actually sees your prototype? she said to me that the actual piece is only limited for the audiences in shows, or exhibitions, but through media platform your works can be seem everywhere in the world, so which one you think has more impact?

After that, when I work as a junior designer in design studio, one day I aware that no matter what your design concept is, the first thing that client will see is the visual images of the design, only then to have the chance to show the actual piece. A bad picture is powerful enough to kill a concept in the cradle no matter how brilliant the idea is, because human are all visual animal, our judgements can be easily influenced by the things we see. So what I understand is to sell a idea, is all about design communication, how you tell the story is the right way, and all the other aspects in product design such as concepts, developments, models and prototypes, is to assist ourselves to tell a compelling story

However, what is a good picture in product photography? Nowadays many product photography appears to me has a strong style or personality, for me, I am type of designer who don't consider have a personal style, but in the world of photography maybe it is a way of approach. In the discussion with Swiss product photographer Cedric Widmer, my question was how a photographer choice their style of photography? By subject, or by personal style? He describes that is depends on types of photographer, for him is always about the product or the subject itself, and based on that to find the approach that is most suitable for that matter.

In this writing piece, my goal is to understand and investigate how to make a good product photography, and design communication. In order to achieve this purpose, I will look into the visual history and evolution to understand where so call 'style' came from, through Italian design magazine online archive to research product and furniture advertisement from 1928 to 2017. By

using these image datas to carefully select a few to analyse and discuss the details and the aspects of that certain image to understand what is the story behinds the image and more importantly how you tell a story by only using one image. In the following writing, I will categorise a few points that I understand in product photography for the discussion, which are the sequence, the figure, and the perspective. Secondly, I will use all these points to conduct a real product photography with my own actual product design project and collaborate with the student of Master photography in ECAL for technical support. In the end, summarise the results and discuss with other professional product photographers to see where it success or failure.

The sequence

Advertisement is about story telling, but compare to other adverts in the magazine, how to make a powerful image for people to remember? Some photographers chose the approach by repeating the same image in many different ways to make compelling a story. The 'photo sequence'.

In this campaign (fig.1) from B&B Italia 1982, titled "For the changing mood, the changing



program, the changing position. Alanda B&B Italia. The sofa that changes.” The product was a sofa that can change the height of the backrest and armrest depends on the occasions. Based on the idea of changing, the photographer use same scene, same sofa, television, character and perspective to create this sequence, the only thing is different is the gesture of the character, small objects, and the sofa backrest. As you can see, the character dress like a house owner feels like watching tv programmes in the living room, and through shifting positions and facial expressions from normal sit still to fully relaxed you can almost

fig.1

feel what kinds of programme he is watching. Also, the lighting, another important factor of in this sequence, by a subtle change of the lighting from gentle to strong, from the angle of ceiling or the television, each photo describes different times in a day, also make the sequence feels like happened in one day. The purpose of this campaign for me is clear, use this technique to sell the idea why we need a sofa that can change.

On the other hand, there's a different campaign series different then the sequence but shows

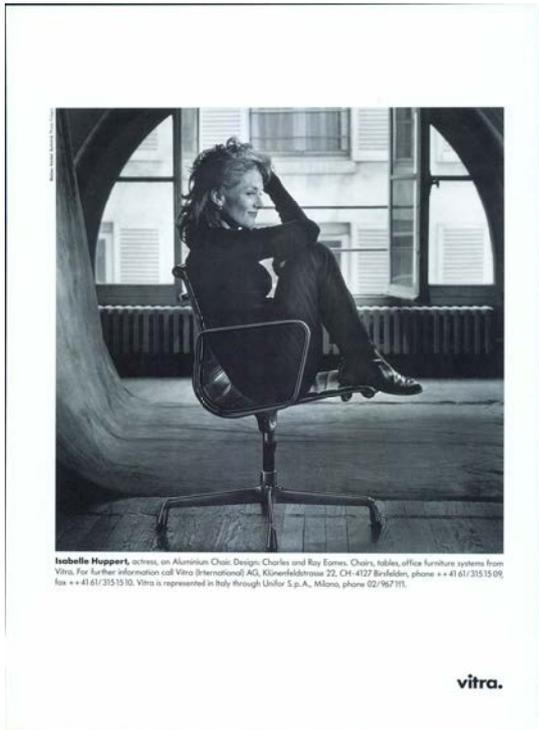


fig.2

similar impact to the audience, it also shows sitting in different ways but tells a entirely different story. From 1987 to 1997 Swiss photographer Christian Coigny been commissioned by furniture company Vitra to create a campaign series call "Vitra personalities" (fig. 2,3), a celebrated advert campaign that lasted for a decade, more than 130 iconic celebrities were photoed, such as Isabelle Huppert, Audrey Hepburn, Keith Haring, Robert Wilson, Ettore Sottsass, and Ray Eames, from director, actor, artist, and designer. In these photos, depends on the character, were use different types of Vitra chairs and different ways of sitting to describe individual personalities. there's few common elements in these photos, such as black and white tone, and even though the scenes were different but they were all shoots in the background with curtain. For me, the main point of this photo series is the power of celebrities image, it somehow tells me that when you buying their product, you are not only buying a chair, but also buying a statement, a statement that represent classic, and you are the person who understand the classic, just like these celebrities. And this story can only be told by photo series not individual, also the story is more relate to



fig.3

brand expression rather than product concept itself.



fig.4
...cover, there's a different types of campaign also shoots in sequence, rather than just furniture and sitting like previous examples, this one involves women and sex. In 1970, an English photographer Brian Duffy use iconic Panton chair as an object took a provocative photo sequence campaign for Vitra, and titled "How to undress in front of your husband" (fig.4). This sequence from fully dressed to nudity, Brian Duffy use these 24 pictures to express his way of seeing and undress the actress in an artful striptease way. The only thing that is changing in this sequence was the movement of the character and clothing accessories. The purpose of this advertisement can be argue that were use the curvature of women body to address the organic outline of Panton chair as a Sexy object, also use this bold and fearless style to describe how unconventional Panton chair was at that time. This controversial image became the historical establishment of sexual indicated advertisement.

The figure

In product photography, different types of character tells different kinds of story, what they wear, age or social status, the movements, and what object they interact with. For photographers it is a tool, a method to create atmosphere relations and indications for people to find out either consciously or subconsciously what it stands for.



fig.5

Different than previous example (fig.4), in 1970, the Italy type writer company Olivetti who had a different interpretation of use a women figure to address their product (fig.5). The slogan says “I have a gift for you” on the left bottom corner of the image, you see a modern lady holding a box shape present, just came out of the cab, full of presents in the cab and out. The most interesting thing in this image is Olivetti did not show the present itself as a type writer or not, but we already knew that it is. There’s overall two signs implies that, first is the shape of the box,

compare to other boxes, it is not square but more tapered indicates the contents inside. Second is on right bottom says “Olivetti Lettera 32” the type of the model. The most important factor of this image is because this modern lady figure who holds the product, for me it became more ‘stylish’ like a fashion statement.

company so the challenge is show what their material stands for without display a physical object. In this picture, you can see that it only has few woolen roll and two kitties in a grey background, all the rolls were selected with calm and non-intensive colour to match with the kitties. What I understand as a reader is softness, they use kitties's fur to reference wool's texture, softness and natural material. People might not know how their material feels like but we all have a rough sense of touch of kitties's.

The perspective

The perspective of capture in photography is a strong language, it can turns an ordinary object become the only thing that matters in the world. Nowadays, photographers tend to create the photo without much figures, but only product itself as the object, and merely convey the story by the lighting, background, and the perspective of the seeing.



fig.8

There's a example to simply describe what means the power of perspective. The advert by furniture company Tecno in 1972 (fig.8), the image only shows a half of their product in a parallel perspective. However, because we normally won't see a chair in this perspective so the image became very strong and graphic. We still

can understand it is a chair, but we might see it more structural rather than a product. For a technical oriented furniture company it might be a good way to describe their product strength and details. For instance, the car advertisement in Japan from AMG (fig.9) demonstrate a similar aspect with Tecno. The parallel perspective lining the whole car



fig.9



fig.10



fig.11

became a stream line, with the reflection of the car, you can almost feel the speed of the vehicle.

Photographer Scheltens Abbenes who consider has a strong personal photography style been commissioned by Arper the furniture company for their

campaign 2011 (fig.10). The image was constructed only by product itself in a very graphic and object ways, you almost need to guess what is the object. Also, there shows no shadow, and almost 2D perspective, makes the guessing even harder for the audience. However, after looking to the picture, actually it describes 3 elements, one seating area in top view, and others are two different types of leg structures. Somehow it kinds make sense and interesting in some ways. For me, as a product designer is very hard to judge, I can only said people might like or dislike. On the other hand, the picture that made by same photographer for Japanese ceramic company Arita (fig.11). We can see some similar aspects in his line of work, it makes me wondering is it a good way to use same types of method to shoot different types of projects?

Furthermore, the advertisement from Lapalma in 2015 (fig.12), compare to the last image it shows more clues for reader to imaging but still use perspective to create a clean and



fig.12

strong object image. The white area of the chair is a square and the chair is in the centre of the area become a powerful language, the black area shows no shadow indicates a desk. The only thing that is different is the calendar, by using design classic it convey the value that the brand want to express, how they want people to picture themselves. For me, it is not a bad picture, it is interesting in some ways, but for nowadays product photography, it is not something special.

Conduct a real product photography

To Be Continue

Summary

To Be Continue